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ABSTRACT

By identifying the cultural roots of traditional grammar, a better understanding may occur as to why grammar will continue to be taught the way it is. The idea of "grammar as cultural heritage" begins with language and literature studies, which were the foundation of middle and upper class Roman schooling and included reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The program was considered a preparation for instruction in rhetoric and was integrated with the study of literature and with practice in writing. The interest in classical studies in Renaissance Europe resulted in the Latinized grammar of English, which was the foundation of English instruction until the middle of the nineteenth century. Three myths about the study of grammar developed: that it strengthens the mind for other tasks, that it "corrects" our language, and that it is a means of enculturation. Instead of grammar study, the study of vocabulary, etymology, syntax, and style can be brought into the lower division composition and literature courses where they can provide a discipline, that is, a common analytical vocabulary for close analysis of the text, a method for aiding interpretation and judgment of a piece of writing, and a sensitivity to the text that is possible through a sensitivity to and knowledge of language. (EL)

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THE CULTURAL TRADITION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY "TRADITIONAL" GRAMMAR TEACHING

This paper is concerned with identifying the cultural roots of traditional grammar -- the prescriptive grammar taught in the schools and in lower division college courses. My thesis is that if we remember how and why grammar was studied in earlier centuries, we will better understand why we continue to teach grammar in the way we do. More important, if we come to understand our place in the tradition of grammar teaching, perhaps we can try to reintegrate grammar with the study of language and literature, so that it more completely fills its ancient role as the essential discipline of the verbal arts.

To begin with, why do we keep on teaching traditional grammar? Occasionally, one still hears the argument in its strong version, to the effect that studying English grammar makes students write or read better. A much greater number of teachers would support the modified argument that grammar study helps students to become critical of their own writing (i.e., to become editors), and to be critical readers. But it isn't merely anxiety about students' verbal skills that gives grammar study its peculiar hold on the minds of educators. We also feel that grammar is, somehow, the core of the language arts; to study grammar is to be "schooled" in the use of the language, to be taught to speak and write so that we fit the cultural norm. In a real sense, language is culture; and grammar, as the study most

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intimately connected with language use, becomes a repository for cultural values. It's a paradox: even though we rationalize the teaching of school grammar as a means of training the mind, or as a corrective for language skills, we are capable of arguing, often passionately, against its replacement by other kinds of skills training -- like sentence combining, or composition writing -- because we sense that grammar study is in fact a cultural necessity, that leaving it out would be in some way "wrong."

Discussing these attitudes doesn't help us to distinguish traditional grammar from the complex of ideas known as "English Grammar," or to measure how effective traditional grammar study is in helping people write better.[1] Attitudes toward grammar teaching are important, though, because they reflect national sentiments about language and language teaching, and they condition the ways in which we attempt to serve the public, as teachers of English. These attitudes may appear more understandable, and less eccentric, if we review the history of grammar in the schools, and see grammar study in its emotionally charged, value-laden earlier roles as a transmitter of cultural heritage; as a collection of rules representing the art, or skill of using the language with "propriety"; and as an instrument of "mental discipline" -- a discipline suited to forming the young mind.

For our purposes, the idea of "grammar as cultural heritage" begins with the language and literature studies which were the foundation of middle and upper class Roman schooling (the Romans learned grammatical theory and pedagogy from the Greeks, but

our own educational system has stronger ties to Roman practices). "Grammar," as it was taught under the Empire, included the study of Latin and Greek grammar, of course, but it also covered those ancillary studies in language which we at present call "the language arts" -- reading, writing, listening, and to a lesser extent, speaking. These secondary studies were for boys, and sometimes girls, between the ages of twelve and fifteen.[2] Their teacher, who held the title of grammaticus,[3] was very often a freedman, a former slave.

Roman grammar study began with the parts of speech, accidence, syntax, spelling, and vocabulary, accompanied by practice in reading and writing. But the program as a whole was considered a preparation for instruction in rhetoric, and since rhetoric was based on the analysis and delivery of non-fiction texts, the grammaticus paved the way by teaching the analysis and exposition of passages from the poets, chiefly Homer, Virgil, Euripides, Pindar, and Horace.[4] This kind of literary analysis began with the partition of the line -- partitio -- which meant analyzing the sentence structure, classifying each word grammatically, and distinguishing the metrical feet of the verse. This is where we get our word "parsing," which was probably the most common exercise used to teach English grammar in the nineteenth century. On the foundation of this analysis, proceeded the exposition, an extended commentary in which students or their teacher would gloss the difficult words, note any interesting grammatical features, adduce etymologies, and comment on the tropes and figures of speech, especially the similes. Also part of the exposition was the explaining of allusions to people, places, and

events, and to a fund of stories (historiae), which could be factual, but were more often part of the great web of greco-roman mythology.[5]

Finally, and perhaps most useful as a preparation for studies in rhetoric, was the criticism of what we would call style and structure. This line of approach is strongly recommended by Quintilian, who says that teachers "should particularly impress on boys' minds what are the good qualities of arrangement, what appropriateness there is in the treatment of the events described, how it was fitting for the characters to behave, what is praiseworthy in thoughts and diction, where the elaboration and where the restraint is commendable."[6] Obviously, this last kind of exposition reinforced the exercises in written composition which many of the Latin grammar teachers had taken over from the rhetoric course. These were the so-called preliminary training exercises, or progymnasmata. There were about a dozen types, and they were carefully graded in order of difficulty. The simpler exercises, based on the writing or imitating of fables, sayings (sententiae), and mythological narratives, were considered proper for the grammarian, while exercises that resembled "practical oratory," such as the Commonplaces, the Comparisons, and the Speeches in Character, were usually reserved for the teacher of rhetoric.[7]

In the Roman schools, then, grammar study was integrated with the study of literature, and with practice in writing. This tradition held that a broad-based program of grammar and other language studies was the best preparation for Roman public life,

which required considerable abilities in written and spoken communication. Changes in that tradition show how the teaching of language adjusts itself to social needs. For while Roman functionaries had a real and pressing need to communicate effectively in a variety of public and semi-public situations, such a need did not exist in the Roman provinces after the economy had failed and the legions were withdrawn. When Rome ceased to be a center of power, the common language of business and social life inevitably shifted from Latin to the local dialects, while Latin remained as the traditional language of literature, the church, official records, and academic or formal communication. Inescapably, then, Latin was chiefly taught as a written language,[8] a practice that led to an emphasis on sentence architecture instead of readability, and on the refinements of style instead of the easiness of normal usage. In effect, Latin had become a little more than simply a means of communication; it was now perceived as a set of communicative norms, codified and unchanging. The consequences of this for the study of Latin in the Middle Ages are described by Jespersen:

> Grammar was not (even primarily) the science of how words were inflected and how forms were used by the old Romans, but chiefly and essentially the art of inflecting words and of using the forms yourself, if you wanted to write correct Latin. This you must say, and these faults you must avoid -- such were the lessons imparted in the schools.[9]

The reinvigoration of classical studies in Renaissance Europe

had the effect of intensifying the study of Latin language and literature, in that school boys were inculcated with the precepts of Quintilian (available, by this time, in a complete manuscript), were trained to imitate Ciceronian prose, and were assigned lists of readings in the Latin authors that we, today, find staggering. In consequence, the study of Latin grammar was pursued as part of a literary, or textual tradition. The important virtues in such a tradition were stylistic ones -- correctness first, followed by fullness and variety of expression (copia), and the proper use of the "colors of rhetoric" (figures of speech). The overwhelming emphasis on style meant that, at its worst, instruction in the schools encouraged an artificial imitation of classical prose styles. At its lowest level, such teaching simply enforced the memorization of grammar rules. That such memorization was a common requirement in the schools is suggested by evidence like the comment of Erasmus in De Ratione Studii (1511), where he says that he has "no patience with the stupidity of the average teacher of grammar who wastes precious hours in hammering rules into children's heads."[10] Not surprisingly, this seems also to have been the level at which the study of English grammar was carried on. Children, after all, did not study English authors (although English selections were becoming more frequent in the florilegia used as school texts in the late sixteenth century). The Greek and Latin auctores were considered the proper fare for young minds. One studied English for the more mundane purpose of learning to write letters and other utilitarian documents which were correct and graceful in their language.

The influence of Latin grammar on English grammarbooks can be readily seen in the grammatical categories (i.e., subject, verb, preposition, etc.) which had simply been taken over from the Latin grammar texts. In some cases, the study of these early, "Latinized" English grammars had the dual objective of formalizing the students' grasp of their own language, and easing their transition to the study of actual Latin grammarbooks.[11] This use of Latin grammar as a paradigm for English grammar, and as a constraint on English grammar instruction, was paralleled at a higher level by the impoverishment of grammar (Latin and English) as a scholarly discipline. By the sixteenth century, rhetoric and logic had begun to develop as independent pursuits, so that connections between grammar study and the other parts of the old trivium were generally ignored. The "unified conception of grammar" had, as Ian Michael says, faded into obscurity:

> Questions about language as a social activity, the affective elements in language, much that we would call the psychology of language -- all this belonged, if anywhere, to rhetoric. If questions could be asked about the validity and meaningfulness of an utterance, or about the functions of different types of utterance, this too was rhetoric, or logic. The symbolic nature of language . . . was lost sight of, and by the time the first English grammars were written only a little was left even of the old lip-service paid to a unified conception of grammar in which literary criticism and exposition were kept in relation to the history and classification of words and discourse.[12]

But if the Latinized English grammar study of the Renaissance is beginning to sound like a dead end, as far as the transmission of cultural heritage is concerned, we should recall that grammarians and educated people from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century thought it a great virtue that Latin and Greek were "stable" and "fixed". Since these were no longer spoken languages, they could not be corrupted by the barbarous usages of the uneducated, the fashionable, foreigners, and those in general who did not care enough to be correct. The classical languages were "pure." Scholars considered them the languages of ancient learning. Consequently, Greek, and more commonly, Latin grammar were considered standards for the fixing and refining of English grammar and usage. English might be purified, its true form "ascertained," by analogy to Latin. As Michael puts it, Latin grammar

> was not just one grammar out of many; it <u>was</u> grammar. There could be no question of "applying" Latin grammar to English. If Latin "had" a grammar it was not for English to have anything different. It could only have the same and less of it.[13]

The practical outcome of this Latinizing of English grammar was a classroom emphasis on inflections, the aspect of English that seemed most similar to Latin. Such an emphasis had its difficulties. Paradigms of noun declensions, for example, included the dative, accusative, and ablative cases, despite the fact that no separate forms for these cases had existed in the English language for centuries.[14] At any rate, this transplanted

grammar was rich in detail and system. Studying it meant learning the definitions of grammatical terms, and the "rules" for their employment in a sentence. Both had been adapted directly from Latin grammar textbooks. This material lent itself naturally to memorizing and recitation, and that is how it was taught: exactly as Latin grammar had been taught since the fall of the empire, more than a thousand years before.

Despite the cumbrousness of this Latinized grammar of English, it remained as the foundation of English instruction until the middle of the nineteenth century, by which time, scholarly disputes about the artistic inadequacy of the English language had long been settled. Why this enduring appeal? The eighteenth century had a related and equally powerful reason for drilling students in grammar, a purpose set forth in clear terms by the first sentence in Lindley Murray's famous and exemplary grammar published in 1795: "English grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety."[15] "English grammar," in other words, was regarded as the acquired skill of using the language properly, in the manner of gentlefolk, by putting to use a prescribed set of rules. These assumptions require some explaining. In our own time, grammarians manipulate models, trying to account for the way the patterns of our language are produced. But for most eighteenth and early nineteenth-century grammarians, the "rules" of accidence and syntax were the actual principles of how the language worked. They were like a "program" for using the language. It followed that memorizing -- actually, "internalizing" -- prescriptive

rules of grammar was an essential part of learning to write and speak correctly. Applying the rules in actual composition or conversation came second, for once a student knew the principles of speaking and writing, only facility was lacking, and students had their whole lives ahead of them to practice in.

The teaching of grammar as an art of speaking and writing well ("ars bene dicendi et bene scribendi," as Quintilian had said) asserted its dominance in America in the last fifteen years of the eighteenth century with a flood of prescriptive grammars and related writings about language.[16] The demand for instruction in the art of using English correctly -- with "propriety" -- derived from several sources, the most significant being the rise of middle class citizens toward positions of wealth and respectability. Such people needed to speak and write the language of the gentleman -- not an easy task: for how, and where was one to learn it? What the middle class desired was a fixed and easily accessible standard which they could adopt. At the same time, ironically, the upper classes were hoping that such a standard would be a means of distinguishing between the true artistocrat and the gilded arriviste. Both, in any case, desired that some authority should ascertain the standards of proper and grammatical speech.

A second source of the demand for instruction in correct English was the feeling among the educated that although English had certainly demonstrated its right to be considered a literary language, as Latin had been, it still needed to be pruned of its excesses, purged of the crudities which had marred the natural

grandeur of Shakespeare and Milton. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there were some who thought that such a refinement of the language should be carried out by an English academy of letters, like those already established in France and Italy.[17] Proposals to this effect by Defoe, and most prominently, Swift, were unsuccessful. But the general dissatisfaction with the "irregularities" of English, and the fear that it might, with time, become further corrupted by irresponsible usage were enough to inspire a number of treatises on perfecting the language. Even works like Samuel Johnson's Dictionary(1755), the rhetorics of Blair and Campbell, and the prescriptive grammars of the latter part of the eighteenth century were, in part, responses to the anxiety over ascertainment. And it might be said that later grammars, those of Lindley Murray, Goold Brown, and more recently, Warriner, have acquired something of the authority of that never-to-be-founded English academy.

But it was one particular book -- Murray's compendious, eclectic English Grammar(1795) -- that brought the eighteenth-century emphasis on correctness and rules into the nineteenth century and established it as the reigning tradition. This was a text to be memorized, definition by definition, rule by rule, and recited as a proof of learning. To strengthen one's memory of the rules, exercises in parsing (i.e. applying the rules to each word in the sentence) were provided throughout the text. In addition, the entire second volume of this grammar was also devoted entirely to exercises, which were keyed to the text of volume one.

Exercises in grammar (as opposed to mere recitation, or memory work) became an increasingly important part of grammar study in the course of the nineteenth century. One major reason for this was that students could work independently at their exercises, while the teacher took a rest, or more likely, attended to other problems. A second advantage of exercises was that they provided for active, or to use the jargon of the times, "self-active" learning. The idea that we learn by doing was well-known in American education as early as the 1830's. But it was a corollary idea that has clung most tenaciously to grammar exercises, the notion that drills in grammar were a discipline for the mind, a "mental discipline." In 1856, a teacher named Richards wrote an article for the American Journal of Education and provided us with a definition that may suggest the appeal of this notion:

> Mental discipline . . . may be defined as being such a development and training of all the mental powers or faculties, by habitual exercise, as will most effectively exhibit their native power, and give the subject the full control over them, so that he can use them at will to the extent of their capacity. To acquire this ought to be the great aim of education.[18]

In other words, the mind is like our muscles: exercise it, and it will grow stronger, more flexible, keen and tireless.

Once this mind-body analogy is accepted, its applications are practically infinite. With a little imagination, mental discipline -- in this case, grammar study -- can be conceived as training for almost any intellectual task. Here is John Stuart

Mill, on grammar and logic:

> Consider for a moment what grammar is. It is the most elementary part of logic. It is the beginning of the analysis of the thinking process. The principles and rules of grammar are the means by which the forms of language are made to correspond with the universal forms of thought . . . . the structure of every sentence is a lesson in logic.[19]

Here is William Dwight Whitney, the great nineteenth-century linguist:

> Give me a man who can with full intelligence take to pieces an English sentence -- brief, and not too complicated even -- and I will welcome him as better prepared for further study in other languages than if he had read both Caesar and Vergil, and could parse them in the routine style in which they are so often parsed.[20]

And here is a Mr. Barbour, who taught at the State Normal School in Ypsilanti, Michigan at the end of the century:

> Quite inseparable from this analytical insight into the structure of sentences, is . . . [the] educational value [of grammar study] in giving the mind power to interpret all thought which is difficult to understand. The moment such analysis is extended beyond simple sentences to those which are long and complex it is little else than the formal interpretation of the thought. It tends at once to break up all looseness of interpretation, all satisfaction with a half grasp of thought. It strengthens the mental grip in its seizure upon ideas, and so is most intimately connected with

all subjects of study.

It would be nice if the study of traditional English grammar could help us, and our students, in all of these marvelous ways -- not merely as a training in mental discipline, as nineteenth-century educatiors liked to think, but also as a civilizer of the English tongue, and a gateway to the language and literature of the western world, to repeat once more those ancient and dearly held beliefs. This is the twentieth century, though, and we serve different gods. We are moderns: empirical, eclectic, and skeptical to the bone. Still, I would argue that each of these three major myths about grammar -- and that is what they are, really -- has a certain kind of truth. For example, even though we no longer believe that training in one cognitive skill can enhance performance in a broad range of other skills, we do recognize the value of "discipline' in language studies. Specifically, the descriptive terms provided by traditional grammar are a common language for those who need to discuss the stylistic features of a piece of writing (I have found that there are no descriptive tools, no jargon terms offered by the new grammars, or contemporary studies in stylistics, that answer my needs in reading and teaching as easily as the old jargon of phrases, clauses, and subject-verb-object; and I suspect there are others who feel as I do). Traditional grammar is still a useful tool, and thus it can aid the mind, even though we may no longer believe that it forms, or strengthens the mind for other tasks.

More deeply ingrained, perhaps, in our pedagogical tradition

is the notion that grammar study "corrects" our language, weans us away from slipshop habits, discourages vulgar usage. What we may have to accept is that grammar study is merely one of a number of influences on our spoken and written language, and probably not even a very important one, in terms of its effect. "Television English" and the steady diet of print media assimilated by most students in the schools are forces of linguistic standardization far more powerful than lessons in traditional grammar. And yet, it is the case now, as it was in Elizabethan times, that studying diction, usage and syntax provides a focus, a point of reference for the innumerable "lessons in language" that we absorb daily from our linguistic environment. English teachers are still (in these enlightened times) the people to whom one says "You teach English? Now I'll have to watch my language!" For better or worse, we stand for the discipline of language as it is used; in a similar way, grammar study stands for (although in truth it merely contributes to) the discipline of language as it is learned.

The third grammar myth -- the idea of grammar study as enculturation -- is the most difficult to talk about, but it may be the most important one for us as teachers. It hasn't been so very long since, in Roman fashion, grammar study went hand in hand with reading, writing and rhetoric. In the last century, it was not uncommon to find grammarbooks that contained passages of prose and even poetry -- sometimes as brief illustrations of a particular construction, sometimes as models for imitation. But since the early part of the twentieth century, the teaching of grammar, composition and rhetoric (speech) has for the most part

been directed toward strictly utilitarian goals; as a consequence, these subjects have gone separate ways, each one becoming a specialty of its own, with its own methods, goals, and attitudes toward language. Each of these subjects has developed its particular focus on language, and it is sometimes difficult to see what the study of grammar has to do even with the study of composition, let alone rhetoric.

In some ways, this separation has not served us well. To be more positive about it, redividing the old trivium was necessary at the time, and has made possible the self-definition and development that are possible only through specialization (in an unavoidable imitation of the sciences). But the time has come when grammar study, as a separate subject, is increasingly hard to justify, both for practical and theoretical reasons. The same is beginning to be true of "writing study" -- English composition. We deeply need a way of channeling grammar and composition back into the mainstream of language and literature, where they can contribute to and be nourished by the students' manifold experience of the English language. We need not try to imitate the Romans; this is not the time to rebuild the empire of grammar study. But we can do ourselves good by bringing the study of vocabulary, etymology, syntax and style into our lower division composition and literature courses, where they can provide a <u>discipline</u> -- that is, a common analytical vocabulary for close analysis of the text; a <u>method</u> which will aid our interpretation and judgment of a piece of writing; and best of all, a <u>sensitivity</u> to the text which is possible only through a

sensitivity to and knowledge of language.

NOTES

[1] These issues receive especially clear and thorough treatment in Patrick Hartwell, "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," College English, 47 (Feb., 1985), 105-27, and in J. Stephen Sherwin. Four Problems in Teaching English: A Critique of Research (Scranton, PA: National Textbook Co., 1969), pp. 114-15.

[2] Stanley F. Bonner, Education in Ancient Rome (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 135-7.

[3] Ibid., p. 58.

[4] Ibid., pp. 212-17.

[5] Ibid., pp. 227-40.

[6] Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, I,8.17. Quoted in Bonner, p. 244.

[7] Bonner, pp. 250-53.

[8] Otto Jespersen, Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin (London: Allen and Unwin, 1922), p. 23.

[9] Ibid., p. 24.

[10] Desiderius Erasmus, De Ratione Studii ("Upon the Right Method of Instruction"), 3 (521C-522A), trans. Woodward. In William H. Woodward, Desiderius Erasmus Concerning the Aim and Method of Education (1904; rpt. New York: Teachers College,

Columbia University, 1964), pp. 163-4.

11 Kenneth Charlton, Education in Renaissance England (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 122.

12 Ian Michael, English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 491.

13 Ibid., p. 492.

14 Jespersen, p. 22.

15 Lindley Murray, An English Grammar, Adapted to the different classes of learners . . . (York: Wilson, Spence and Mawman, 1795), p. 1.

16 Rollo L. Lyman, English Grammar in American Schools Before 1850, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education Bulletin, 1921, No. 12, pp. 77-82.

17 See A.C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, A History of the English Language, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 259-69.

18 Z. Richards, "Discipline: Moral and Mental," American Journal of Education, I (1855), 115.

19 Quoted in F.A. Barbour, "History of English Grammar Teaching," Educational Review, 12 (1896), 501.

20 Quoted in Barbour, 502.

[21] Barbour, 503.